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SUBJECT: THE BATTLE FOR BENGAL

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[1](#). (SBU) Summary: West Bengal's Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) dominated Left Front is still reeling from its poor performance in the Lok Sabha polls (see Reftels). The perfect storm of issues appears to have worked against the Left Front. Some CPI-M leaders believe the party lost support when it withdrew support from the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) over the U.S.-India nuclear deal. Other party leaders blame CPI-M's attempt to form a Third Front coalition for its defeat. Others point to a leadership crisis and infighting within CPI-M, the successful merger of Congress and All India Trinamul Congress (AITC) votes, and CPI-M's growing unpopularity among Muslim and rural populations. With state assembly elections in 2011, the Lok Sabha election was just the opening volley in the battle for Bengal, with AITC the clear victor in this round. Over the next two years, this conflict will most likely be fraught with political agitations sometimes leading to violence, which does not bode well for West Bengal's economic growth prospects. End summary.

[2](#). (U) In this year's parliamentary elections, West Bengal's CPI-M dominated Left Front won only 15 out of 42 Lok Sabha seats, a record loss for a coalition that has ruled the state for over 30 years and had exerted tight political control over the state during this time. The Indian National Congress (INC), the AITC and the Socialist Unity Center of India (SUCI) together captured an unexpected 26 seats, leaving one seat for the Bharatiya Janata Party. According to Election Commission records, the Left won 43 percent of the total votes, down from 49 percent in the 2006 state assembly polls (Reftel B). Bengal CPI-M Leaders Blame the Central Party

[3](#). (SBU) Most Bengali CPI-M contacts blame the central committee's national policies for the defeat. Shishir Bajoria, known as the millionaire Marxist and a close advisor to party leaders, told ConGen that withdrawal from the UPA and formation of a Third Front was a mistake. He speculated that voters were forced to choose between a stable central government led by INC or instability with a patchwork ruling coalition if they opted for regional parties. Bajoria noted that the Left Front did particularly poorly among new voters, acknowledging that the Left's anti-American campaigning may have backfired with young voters. Defeated CPI-M MP Prashanta Pradhan also blamed the central party's focus on the nuclear deal, telling the press that the deal was extremely complex and that the poor and the farmers never understood why the party wanted to topple the government. Defeated CPI-M MP Mohammad Salim told PolFSN that a combination of factors worked against the Left in the Lok Sabha polls, including national issues and unpopular local policies. Has the Bengal CPI-M Lost Its Base?

14. (SBU) Contacts in political parties, the media and think-tank organizations are unanimous in the opinion that the 2007-2008 Nandigram and Singur resistance movements against the GOWB's acquisition of agricultural land for industry turned the rural population against the CPI-M (Reftel C). West Bengal's Land and Land Reforms Minister Abdur Rezzak Mollah told the press that the land acquisition issue was "like a disease which starts corroding the body very fast and destroys immunity." He complained that CPI-M leadership did not listen when he warned against land acquisition, noting that land is the most important thing to farmers -- they value it more than their sons and daughters. He argued that the party should not acquire fertile land, only dry barren land.

15. (SBU) A Left-watcher from Anandabazar Patrika (ABP) daily observed that most CPI-M leaders are from wealthy, well-connected families and joined the party as students. Most have no connection to the rural or working classes. Mollah complained that CPI-M has appointed local party leaders who do not represent the interests of the farmers, but instead act "as the lords of their areas." In contrast, analysts emphasize that AITC leader Mamata Banerjee effectively won over the poor with her simple image and election slogans like "Ma Mati Manush" (Note: the slogan "the Mother, the Land, the People" comes from a popular folk play well known in rural communities. End note.)

According to AITC contacts, the party focused on winning over the rural voters, establishing a special cell within the party to mobilize lower caste and minority populations. AITC's election manifesto highlighted pro-farmer and pro-poor policies, opposing Foreign Direct Investment, Special Economic Zones and the acquisition of fertile land for industry. Residents in rural and Muslim-dominated Murshidabad district, in which INC now has a solid majority of votes, credited Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee with extensive road repairs completed just before the elections. The head of a large madrasa noted that Mukherjee had provided funds for the school from his own pocket, contrasting this to the lack of any support from the GOWB. Mainstream Media Turns Against CPI-M

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16. (SBU) Bajoria complained to ConGen that the news media was blatantly anti-CPI-M in this election campaign. ABP, the most widely read Bengali newspaper in the state and once a strong supporter of Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee's economic reforms, turned against the CPI-M after AITC and INC forged their political alliance. Sumit Das Gupta (protect), editor of the Metro section of the Telegraph, ABP's English newspaper, told ConGen that ABP's owner, Aveek Sarkar, was actively engaged in setting the tone of ABP's reporting during the elections and the reporting was intentionally anti-CPI-M. ABP's popular news channel Star Ananda effectively telecast anti-Left movements in Nandigram and Singur along with projecting Mamata Banerjee's formidable anti-Left image. Rathikanta Basu, owner of Tara TV, told ConGen that he began the anti-CPI-M shift by being the first to provide live telecasts of events in Nandigram in 2008. He unabashedly acknowledged that his goal is to remove CPI-M from power and that he is using his media company to assist. Analyst Sabyasachi B. Roychaudhuri noted that, in contrast, CPI-M channels like Chabbis Ghanta and Akaash Bangla failed to impress viewers with their interpretations of the opposition's movements.

And so the Battle Continues

17. (SBU) Immediately after election results, press reported multiple incidents of violence between CPI-M and AITC workers. According media reports, the CPI-M stronghold of Khejuri village in Nandigram area fell to violent and jubilant AITC workers immediately after election results were announced. Villagers told journalists they were intimidated by the option to either join AITC or vacate the area. AITC workers, under directions from new AITC MP Suvendu Adhikary, raided CPI-M premises and recovered hoarded arms which were handed over to the police. Maoist violence in Lalgarh has intensified and may be politically motivated (Reftel A). The agitation for a separate Gorkhaland in North Bengal also intensified and a Gorkha Janamukti Morcha leader told PolFSN that they are demanding local panchayat elections at village, district and sub-divisional level. (Note: Darjeeling is the only district in

West Bengal that did not had panchayat elections in 2008).

¶8. (SBU) The next round of elections are 19 municipal elections in several different state districts. Several state assembly seats are vacant with bi-elections due by the end of 2009. In Spring 2010, elections will be held for the Kolkata Municipal Corporation, West Bengal's largest municipal body. AITC MP Somen Mitra expressed apprehension that these small elections will spark even more political violence which could degenerate over time into progressive chaos over the next few years. Murshidabad District Magistrate told ConGen that violent clashes among a highly politically aware rural population are now a daily occurrence and he expects it to continue until assembly elections.

Comment

¶9. (SBU) There is only one issue now in West Bengal - the battle for control of the state. Every other issue - Maoist violence, industrialization, relief for cyclone victims, Gorkhaland agitation -- will be viewed by politicians, the news media and the general population through the lens of state assembly elections. As Railways Minister, Banerjee will focus on initiatives that improve AITC's image in West Bengal and will most likely oppose any policies that could be viewed as anti-farmer. Despite her public announcement on June 17 that she does not support violence, it will be difficult for her to rein in the culture of violence that has prevailed in West Bengal for the past three decades.

¶10. (SBU) The CPI-M is in crisis internally, unable to fathom its future policies and course of action. At the government level too, decisiveness is not evident. The party can only wait to see how Banerjee handles the dichotomy of her supporters indulging in violence and her official position of responsibility at a national level. For the 2011 state assembly elections, both the Left and the opposition have a fair chance of success. If AITC fails to prove itself as a party with vision and discipline after winning the national polls, voters may turn to the devil they know from three decades of heavy-handed rule - the Left. Uncertainty and inaction by a government besieged by protests and violence in several areas may put development on the back-burner for the time being. End comment.

PAYNE